

# ALGERIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner that infringes on Islamic morals. The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion if they respect public order and regulations. “Offending or insulting” any religion is a criminal offense. The law criminalizes blasphemy but not apostasy. Proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslims is a crime.

In October, Ahmadi Muslim community leaders said 33 Ahmadi Muslims were defendants in the court system on charges including blasphemy, holding unauthorized gatherings, and illegal fundraising, a decline from an estimated 50 defendants in February 2021, and 220 in October 2020. In March, a court sentenced the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA), Pastor Salaheddine Chalah, to 18 months in prison for proselytizing on social media, practicing non-Muslim religious rites without authorization, and “inciting an unarmed gathering,” the charge for unauthorized protests. An appeals court later reduced the sentence to a six-month suspended sentence and a fine. Four members of the Ahmadi Muslim community remained in prison during the year on charges of blasphemy, holding unauthorized gatherings, and illegally fundraising. In September, authorities charged Christian convert Slimane Bouhafs with offenses that included offense against the Prophet Muhammad, publication of false news, and inciting hatred and racial discrimination. In April 2021, a court sentenced Said Djabelkheir, a well-known Muslim Sufi scholar, to three years in prison for “offenses to Islam.” Djabelkheir wrote that the sacrifice of sheep predated Islam and denounced child marriage. At the end of the year, an appeal of his sentence was still pending.

Several religious groups, including the Ahmadi Muslim community and the EPA, said the government had yet to accept their registration applications. Both groups have made several attempts to register since 2012. According to EPA and civil society leaders, authorities continued to arrest, jail, and fine EPA members on charges of proselytizing. In September, the EPA reported the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA) slowed its import of Bibles. EPA leaders said the government closed eight churches during the year, bringing the total to 36 EPA-affiliated churches

closed since 2017. According to media reports, there are 11 EPA churches remaining in the country. Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist groups said the government sometimes did not respond to their requests for foreign religious workers' visas, resulting in de facto visa refusals.

Some Christian leaders and congregants stated that non-Muslims faced social pressure for practicing a non-Muslim faith. Some individuals who engaged in religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported they had experienced threats and intolerance. Some local media outlets occasionally criticized Ahmadi Islam and Shia Islam as "sects" or "deviations" from Islam or as "foreign" and demonstrated a bias against these groups. Ahmadi leaders said news outlets continued to amplify what they considered government misinformation portraying Ahmadis as violent.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers frequently met with senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to discuss religious tolerance and respect and religious freedom, including the difficulties Ahmadis, Christians, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. The Ambassador routinely visited religious institutions and met with faith communities during her travels throughout the country. The Ambassador and other embassy officers focused on pluralism and religious tolerance and respect in meetings with leaders from both Sunni Muslim and minority religious groups as well as with other members of the public. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers' programs to emphasize messages of religious respect and tolerance.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Algeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 44.2 million (mid-year 2022), more than 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school. Religious groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the

population include Christians, Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shia Muslims, and a community of Ibadi Muslims who reside principally in Ghardaia Province. Religious leaders estimate there are fewer than 200 Jews and fewer than 200 Ahmadi Muslims.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Religious leaders' unofficial estimates of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up most of the Christian population. The Christian population includes students, and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa without legal status. Christian leaders say citizens who are Christians predominantly belong to Protestant groups.

Christians reside mostly in Algiers and the provinces of Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from engaging in behavior incompatible with Islamic values. The constitution states, "The freedom of opinion is inviolable." The freedom to exercise worship is guaranteed if it is exercised in accordance with the law. "Offending or insulting" any religion is a criminal offense. The law criminalizes blasphemy but not apostasy. The state ensures the protection of places of worship from any political or ideological influence.

The law does not prohibit religious conversion, including from Islam, but proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offense. The law prescribes a maximum punishment of one million dinars (\$7,300) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training institutions, or any financial means." Making, storing, or distributing printed documents or audiovisual

materials with the intent of “shaking the faith” of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties.

The law criminalizes blasphemy. The penal code provides punishment of three to five years in prison and/or a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 dinars (\$366-\$733) for offending the Prophet Muhammad or other messengers of God or disparaging the dogma or precepts of Islam through writing, drawing, declaration, or any other means. The law also criminalizes insults directed at any other religion and prescribes the same penalties.

The law grants all individuals the right to practice their religion if they respect public order and regulations.

The constitution establishes a High Islamic Council and states the council shall encourage and promote *ijtihad* (the use of independent reasoning as a source of Islamic law for issues not precisely addressed in the Quran) and shall express opinions on religious questions presented for its review. The president of the republic appoints the members of the council and oversees its work. The constitution requires the council to submit regular reports to the president on its activities. A presidential decree further defines the council’s mission as taking responsibility for all questions related to Islam, for correcting mistaken perceptions, and for promoting the true fundamentals and correct understanding of the religion. The council may issue fatwas at the request of the president.

The law requires any civil society group, religious or otherwise, to register with the government as an association prior to conducting any activities. The law requires all organizations registered prior to 2012 to reregister. The National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship, chaired by the MRA, approves the registrations of religious groups, after a legal compliance review by the Ministry of Interior (MOI); only registered associations are officially recognized. Unregistered associations have no legal status and may not legally own property, open bank accounts, convene gatherings, or raise funds. Members of active, unregistered groups may be subject to criminal prosecution. The ministry registration requirements for national-level associations stipulate the founding members must furnish documents proving their identities, addresses, and other biographic details; provide police and judicial records to prove their good standing in society; demonstrate they have founding members residing in at least one quarter of the

country's provinces to prove the association merits national standing; submit the association's constitution signed by its president; and submit documents indicating the location of its headquarters.

The law requires the MOI to provide a receipt for an application once it has received all required documentation. The ministry has 60 days to respond to applicants following the submission of a completed application. If the ministry does not respond within the 60-day timeframe, the application is automatically approved, and the receipt may be used as proof of registration. If the ministry considers the application incomplete, it does not issue a receipt for the application. The law grants the government full discretion in making registration decisions but allows applicants to appeal a denial to an administrative tribunal. For associations seeking to register at the local or provincial level, application requirements are similar, but an association's membership and sphere of activity is strictly limited to the area in which it registers. An association registered at the *wilaya* (provincial) level is confined to that specific wilaya.

The MRA has the legal responsibility to review registration applications of religious associations and assist non-Muslim communities with the registration process.

The law charges the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship with facilitating the registration process for all non-Muslim groups by gathering all relevant authorities into a single consultative committee. The MRA chairs the commission, which meets on an ad-hoc basis, and is composed of senior representatives of the Ministries of National Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs; the Presidency; national police; national gendarmerie; and the governmental National Human Rights Council (CNDH).

The constitution requires a presidential candidate to be Muslim. Under the law, non-Muslims may hold other public offices and work within the government.

The law prohibits religious associations from receiving funding from political parties or foreign entities. The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. Membership in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), an Islamist political party banned since 1992, remains illegal.

The law specifies the manner and conditions under which religious services, Islamic or otherwise, must take place. The law states that religious gatherings, for worship or other purposes, are subject to regulation, and the government may shut down any religious service taking place in private homes or in outdoor settings without official approval. Except for daily prayers, which are permissible anywhere, Islamic services may take place only in state-sanctioned mosques. Friday prayers are further limited to certain specified mosques.

Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered with the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice and be administered by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the exterior. A request for permission to observe special non-Islamic religious events must be submitted to the relevant *wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must occur in buildings accessible to the public. Requests must include information on three principal organizers of the event, its purpose, the number of attendees anticipated, a schedule of events, and its planned location.

The wali may request the organizers move the location of an event or deny permission for it to take place if the wali deems it would endanger public order or harm “national constants,” “good mores,” or “symbols of the revolution.” If unauthorized meetings go forward without approval, police may disperse the participants. According to the penal code, individuals who fail to disperse at the behest of police are subject to arrest and a prison term of two to 12 months.

The penal code states only government-authorized imams, whom the state hires and trains, may lead prayers in mosques and penalizes anyone else who preaches in a mosque with a fine of up to 100,000 dinars (\$733) and a prison sentence of one to three years. Any persons, including government-authorized imams, who act “against the noble nature of the mosque” or in a manner “likely to offend public cohesion, as determined by a judge” may be fined as much as 200,000 dinars (\$1,466) or receive a prison sentence of three to five years. The law states that such acts include using the mosque to achieve purely material or personal objectives or with a view to harming persons or groups.

The MRA provides financial support to mosques and pays the salaries of imams and other religious personnel as well as healthcare and retirement benefits. The

law also provides for the payment of salaries and benefits to non-Muslim religious leaders who are citizens. The Ministry of Labor regulates the amount of an individual imam's or mosque employee's pay and likewise sets the salaries of registered non-Muslim religious groups' religious leaders who are Algerian citizens, based on their position within their individual churches.

The Ministries of Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Commerce must approve the importation of all printed materials, including religious texts and items, except those intended for personal use. Authorities generally consider "importation" to be approximately 20 or more religious texts or items.

The law gives authorities broad power to ban books that run counter to the constitution, "the Muslim religion and other religions, national sovereignty and unity, the national identity and cultural values of society, national security and defense concerns, public order concerns, and the dignity of the human being and individual and collective rights." In accordance with a governmental decree, a commission within the MRA reviews importation of the Quran. The decree requires all applications to include a full copy of the text and other detailed information about the applicant and text. The ministry has three to six months to review the text, with the absence of a response after that time constituting a rejection of the importation application.

A separate decree covering religious texts other than the Quran states, "The content of religious books for import, regardless of format, must not undermine the religious unity of society, the national religious reference, public order, good morals, fundamental rights and liberties, or the law." The importer must submit the text and other information, and the ministry must respond within 30 days. A nonresponse after this period is considered a rejection. Religious texts distributed without authorization may be seized and destroyed.

The law states the government must approve any modification of structures intended for non-Islamic collective worship.

The family code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam, although authorities do not always enforce this provision. The code does not prohibit Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women. Under the law, children born to a Muslim father are considered Muslim

regardless of the mother's religion. In the event of a divorce, a civil court determines the custody of any children.

The law requires couples to present a government-issued marriage license before imams may conduct religious marriage ceremonies.

The Ministries of National Education and Religious Affairs require, regulate, and fund the study of Islam in public schools. Religious education focuses on Islamic studies but includes information on Christianity and Judaism and is mandatory at the primary and secondary school levels. The Ministry of National Education requires private schools to adhere to curricula in line with national standards, particularly regarding the teaching of Islam, or risk closure.

The constitution states discrimination based on religion is prohibited and guarantees state protection for non-Muslims and for the "toleration and respect of different religions."

The law prohibits all forms of expression that propagate, encourage, or justify discrimination. The government passed a separate hate speech law in 2020, but religious belief or affiliation are not among the categories covered by the law.

The CNDH is responsible for monitoring and evaluating human rights issues, including matters related to religious freedom. The president of the CNDH is appointed by the president of the republic, and its members include civil society representatives and academics. The law authorizes the CNDH to conduct investigations of alleged abuses, issue opinions and recommendations, conduct awareness campaigns, and work with other government authorities to address human rights issues. The CNDH may address religious concerns with appropriate government offices on behalf of individuals or groups it believes are not being treated fairly. The CNDH does not have the authority to enforce its decisions but may refer matters to the relevant administrative or criminal court. It submits an annual report to the president.

By law, individuals who convert from Islam to another religion are ineligible to receive an inheritance, in the absence of a will.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



## **Government Practices**

Several human rights organizations and religious advocacy organizations, including Amnesty International, the Religious Freedom Institute, the World Evangelical Association, and the Minority Rights Organization, submitted documents and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council ahead of the country's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November. The UPR submissions focused on the government's treatment of the Ahmadi Muslim and Protestant Christian communities, which one submission characterized as "State-inflicted harassment" that "continues unabated, in blatant violation" of the constitution.

In September, according to international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), authorities charged Christian convert Slimane Bouhafs with a variety of offenses, including blasphemy and terrorism related crimes. On December 16, a court in Algiers sentenced Bouhafs to three years in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$733) for "belonging to a terrorist organization," alleging he was a member of the Self-Determination of Kabylie (also commonly known as MAK) group, which the government designated a terrorist organization in 2021. Several human rights organizations reported Bouhafs had been forcibly returned from Tunisia in 2021 where he had refugee status. At year's end, Bouhafs remained in prison and faced additional charges, including of committing offenses against the Prophet Muhammad.

In June, the government charged a group of Shiite Muslims with "participating in an unauthorized group" and "denigrating Islam." The judge ordered three members detained and released 15 others pending an investigation. A group member said authorities had been "intimidating and harassing" the group since April, interrogating them about their religious beliefs, and confiscating their passports, cell phones, and laptops. On September 20, a Bejaia trial court convicted them, sentencing three members to one year in prison and the rest to six months in prison and a fine for participating in "an association that has not been registered or accredited" and for "insulting the Islamic religion." On October 26, an appeals court in Bejaia postponed the appeal hearing for the 18 members of the group.

At the end of the year, Ahmadi Muslim community leaders said 33 Ahmadi Muslims were defendants in cases in the court system, a decline from an estimated 50 defendants in February 2021 and 220 in October 2020. According to Ahmadi Muslim leaders, many of the cases predating 2018 were dismissed after authorities failed to pursue them. Ahmadi Muslim community leaders stated that some judges, especially those in more populous northern cities, were tolerant towards Ahmadi Muslims. For example, in Constantine, in the eastern part of the country, judges acquitted Ahmadi Muslims during the year and affirmed in court proceedings that Ahmadi Muslims are true Muslims.

On June 3, the Anti-Cybercrime Brigade of the Judicial Police in the wilaya of Constantine arrested a man for a Facebook post displaying cartoons and pictures deemed offensive to the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets of Islam.

On March 13, a court sentenced EPA President Chalah to 18 months in prison, and three fellow EPA members to six months in prison, on charges of “practicing worship without prior approval of the National Commission for non-Muslim Worship,” “using social media to call for unlawful activity by a clergyman,” and “inciting an unarmed gathering,” the charge for unauthorized protests. On June 20, an appeals court in Tizi Ouzu dropped the charges of inciting an unarmed gathering and reduced the sentences to six-month suspended sentences and a fine, resulting in the immediate release of all four EPA figures.

On January 30, a trial court in Tizi Ouzou sentenced EPA member Derrab Mohamed to 18 months in prison for illegally storing religious literature with the aim of proselytizing Muslims. His sentence was reduced on appeal, and he spent 70 days in prison before being released.

At year’s end, three Ahmadi Muslims remained in prison following their 2021 sentencing to two years in prison by an appeals court in Adrar on charges of blasphemy and illegal fundraising. Authorities sentenced one in absentia after he failed to respond to a summons that Ahmadi Muslim leaders say he never received. At the time of the trial, their Algiers-based lawyer was unable to attend the court proceedings due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, and the judge refused the defendants’ request to postpone the proceedings.

Ahmadi Muslim leaders reported that in 2021, the Supreme Court ordered the arrest of a community member in the wilaya of Belabbas who had been convicted in 2017, but never sentenced, on charges of holding unauthorized gatherings and illegal fundraising. The community member was sentenced to three years in prison at year's end. The Supreme Court also issued a three-year prison sentence against a codefendant in the case; however, the co-defendant was not arrested and remained free at the end of the year.

Hamid Soudad, convicted in 2018 of "denigrating the dogma or precepts of Islam," remained in prison at the end of the year. In 2021, an Oran court upheld Soudad's five-year prison sentence and fine of 100,000 dinars (\$733) for reposting a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad on his Facebook account. Soudad's lawyer, Farid Khemisti, attributed the severity of the sentence to Soudad's conversion to Christianity.

Said Djabelkhir remained free at year's end while his case for blasphemy was pending appeal. In 2021, a court in Algiers convicted Djabelkhir of blasphemy for "offending the precepts of Islam" and sentenced him to three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars (\$366). Djabelkhir, an Islamic scholar specializing in Sufism, founded the "Circle of Enlightenment for Free Thought," an association for thinkers and academics who advocate a progressive Islam. Authorities reportedly summoned Djabelkhir to court after a fellow academic filed a complaint that his writings on various Islamic rituals, such as the Hajj and animal sacrifices on Eid al-Fitr, and denunciation of child marriage, among other critiques, constituted "an attack and mockery of the authentic hadiths of the Sunna [the custom and practice] of the Prophet" and had caused psychological harm to individuals.

Non-Muslim religious leaders reported no contact with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship. The government said it had never received any applications from non-Muslim groups, although the Catholic Church had successfully reregistered in 2012 in accordance with the law.

The Ahmadi Muslim community remained unregistered although, according to NGOs and Ahmadi Muslim community leaders, it submitted an application for registration to the government in 2012, as the law requires, and again in 2016 and 2020. In September, the MOI said it had never received a registration application

from the Ahmadi Muslim community, although the government had said previously that it refused to accept applications from the community to register as a Muslim religious association because it did not consider the Ahmadi Muslim community to be Muslim. The government said in 2019 it would approve the community's registration as non-Muslims, but the Ahmadis said they would not accept registration as non-Muslims.

In May, the head of the *daira* (municipality) of Sidi-Aich denied the Ahmadi Muslim community's request to the Organizational and General Affairs Directorate of the wilaya of Bejaia to hold meetings required for the formation of a national religious association. Following the refusal, the Ahmadi community in June discussed its registration with the mediator of the republic, a position under the Presidency to which citizens may appeal administrative challenges, and with the secretary of the mediator of the republic, but the government continued to not accept the community's application for registration.

In June, the president of the Ahmadi Muslim community sent a letter requesting to meet with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune about the community's registration problems, but as of year's end, he had not received a response.

The EPA, the United Methodist Church (UMC), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church said they still had not received responses from the MOI to their 2012 and subsequent applications to reregister. According to a pastor associated with the EPA, the church resubmitted its 2014 registration application in 2015 and 2016, but despite several follow-ups with the government, the MOI never accepted its application. None of the churches received receipts for their registration attempts. In 2019, authorities responded to the EPA's registration request and asked for modifications to the EPA's constitution. The EPA made the requested changes but at year's end had not received a receipt for its application. The EPA confirmed the MRA stated that the MOI was responsible for registration-related decisions and that the MRA could not get involved with the EPA's registration issue. The EPA applied for registration to the MOI for its initial legal sufficiency review on December 19 but had not received a response by year's end.

Some Christian leaders in the country attributed the EPA's registration challenges to its emphasis on proselytizing and conversion as well as to the EPA's primarily Algerian composition.

Some religious groups said they functioned as registered 60 days after having submitted their application, even though they had not received a MOI confirmation. Such groups said, however, that service providers such as utilities and banks refused to provide services without proof of registration. As a result, these groups faced the same administrative obstacles as unregistered associations. They also had limited standing to pursue legal complaints and could not engage in charitable activities, which required bank accounts.

In September, Caritas, a charitable arm of the Catholic Church, publicly announced the MOI had ordered its closure. Caritas had operated in the country since June 1962, but was not registered as an NGO. In October, church leaders reported they had reached an understanding with authorities to bring the operations of Caritas directly under the Catholic Archdiocese, which was in progress at the end of the year. According to Catholic officials, Caritas's expansion of operations to aid migrants between 2021 and 2022 required it, according to the law, to register separately as an NGO.

The MRA said it did not view Ibadis as a minority group and considered the Ibadi religious school a part of the country's Muslim community. Muslim scholars stated Ibadis could pray in Sunni mosques and that Sunnis could pray in Ibadi mosques.

In November, EPA officials reported that the EPA-affiliated Protestant Church of the Full Gospel in Tizi Ouzou, which the NGO Human Rights Watch described as the largest Protestant church in the country, remained closed. Police closed the church in 2019.

In October, Catholic Church officials stated they were able to conduct religious services without interference from the authorities. Catholic officials in Setif also said they were allowed to worship freely, and authorities facilitated visits by church officials to minister to Christian prisoners three times per week. Church officials in Constantine attested to similar freedom of worship.

Some Protestants said they continued to use homes or businesses as "house churches" due to government delays in issuing the necessary legal authorizations. The EPA said they had good relationships with some local authorities, who

allowed them to practice their faith in unregistered spaces. Other Christian groups, particularly in the country's primarily Berber Kabylie Region, reportedly held worship services discreetly.

Representatives of the small Jewish community indicated the community had few day-to-day challenges with authorities. Although the representatives said the community was not officially registered as a religious association, authorities allowed prayer gatherings with other members of the community in their homes.

Anglican Church officials said government officials welcomed the church and allowed its members worship, despite a lack of official registration as a religious association under the law.

According to the MRA, the government continued to allow government employees to wear religious attire, including the hijab, crosses, and the niqab, at work. The armed forces imposed certain restrictions prohibiting long beards for men or wearing head and face coverings for women that authorities stated could complicate the performance of their official duties.

According to religious leaders, authorities continued to arrest, jail, and fine Christians on charges of proselytizing Muslims, which prompted churches to restrict some activities, such as the distribution of religious literature.

On December 7, an appeals court in Ain Defla reduced the sentence of Christian convert Foudhil Bahloul to a six-month suspended prison term and a 100,000 dinar fine (\$733). In 2021, a court in Ain Defla had sentenced Bahloul to six months in prison and the same fine for distributing Bibles, printing religious brochures to distribute to Muslims, illegally collecting money from abroad, and "shaking the faith of Muslims." He had remained free pending an appeal of his case.

Non-Islamic religious texts, music, and video media continued to be available on the informal market, and stores and vendors in the capital sold Bibles in several languages, including Arabic, French, and Tamazight.

In September, EPA leaders reported challenges importing religious material. The Biblical Society, which imports religious texts for all Christian denominations,

stated that the government does not explicitly limit the number of imported Bibles, but rather slows down the importation process with excessive regulations. The Biblical Society requested assistance from the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship but did not receive a response.

Christian Pastor Rachid Seighir and bookstore salesman Nouh Hamimi remained free while appealing their 2021 convictions. In June 2021, a judge sentenced Seighir to a one-year suspended prison sentence and a 200,000-dinar (\$1,466) fine for “shaking the faith of Muslims” with Christian literature at his bookstore. That month, authorities ordered the sealing of Seighir’s Oratoire City Church in Oran to prevent its use. Hamimi also received a one-year suspended sentence and a fine of 200,000 dinars (\$1,466) in the same case.

MRA officials again said the government did not regularly prescreen and approve sermons before imams delivered them during Friday prayers. They also stated the government sometimes provided preapproved sermon topics for Friday prayers to address the public’s concerns following major events or to encourage civic participation through activities such as voting in elections. The MRA said it did not punish imams who did not discuss the suggested sermon topics.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and limited resources, it was unclear if the government continued monitoring sermons delivered in mosques. According to MRA officials, in the past, if a ministry inspector suspected an imam’s sermon was inappropriate, particularly if it supported violent extremism, the inspector had the authority to summon the imam to a “scientific council” composed of Islamic law scholars and other imams who assessed the sermon’s “correctness.” The government could relieve an imam of duty if he was summoned multiple times. The government also monitored activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses, such as recruitment by extremist groups, and prohibited the use of mosques as public meeting places outside of regular prayer hours.

Since 2017, the government ordered the closure of 36 EPA-affiliated churches; 16 were sealed or locked to prevent entry, including eight during the year. According to media reports, 11 EPA churches remain open in the country. The government stated the closed churches had operated without government authorization, illegally printed evangelical publications, and failed to meet building safety codes. MOI officials also stated the government allowed many churches to operate

despite their lack of official registration. EPA officials said authorities generally allowed them to organize small prayer groups in homes, often using social media, with groups of nine or less. Larger groups, according to EPA President Chalah, attracted the attention of authorities, and the homeowners risked having authorities accuse them of operating unregistered “garage churches.”

In September, EPA officials said authorities threatened to close seven additional churches, including four in Tizi Ouzou. In February, the wali of Tizi-Ouzou officially ordered the closure of one of those four EPA-affiliated properties, the UMC church of Larbaa-Nath-Irathen, for operating as a place of worship without prior approval of the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship and for building code violations.

In November, EPA leaders said that while closing an EPA-affiliated church in 2019, authorities in the wilaya of Tizi Ouzou had sealed the personal home of a senior EPA pastor located in the same compound. Authorities allegedly sealed the home for building code violations, and the senior EPA pastor said it remained sealed at the end of the year.

A Jewish community leader said the community sought permission from the government to rehabilitate an old synagogue but had not received a response by the end of the year, although MRA officials had previously stated they had no objection to the rehabilitation. The synagogue property, which the Jewish community owned, remained in disrepair and unused.

The UMC continued to own and maintain Methodist properties throughout the country, despite the relatively small Methodist community and the absence of an in-country bishop. The government denied the previous bishop’s residency renewal in 2008 and the UMC is overseen by a bishop in Tunis whose visa request to visit Algeria was pending. Until 2019, the UMC maintained a power of attorney to manage the properties’ legal affairs, although the Tunis-based bishop reported that Algerian embassies abroad had delayed the approval process to obtain the power of attorney. The power of attorney expired in 2019, and as of year’s end, the UMC had not succeeded in establishing a new power of attorney, although church representatives said the delays had been mainly their responsibility.



Christian leaders said courts were sometimes biased against non-Muslims in family law cases such as divorce or custody proceedings.

According to religious community leaders, some local administrations did not always verify religions before conducting marriage ceremonies. As such, some couples were able to marry despite the family code prohibition against Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men.

A representative of the small Jewish community said it had relatively good relationships with authorities.

Christian groups continued to say the government did not respond in a timely manner to their requests for visas for foreign religious workers and visiting scholars and speakers, resulting in de facto visa refusals. Catholic leaders said religious workers experienced long and unpredictable wait times for religious workers' visas but noted an improvement during the year with the easing of COVID-19 related restrictions.

Catholic and Protestant groups continued to state these delays hindered religious practice. UMC officials said the lack of visa issuances was a major impediment to maintaining contact with the church's presence in-country. Higher-level intervention with officials responsible for visa issuance by senior MRA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at the request of religious groups sometimes resulted in the issuance of long-term visas, according to those groups. UMC leaders said they were pursuing a visit by their Tunis-based bishop in 2023. The last official UMC visit to the country took place in 2013.

During the year, the government approved the Anglican canon's visa and granted his residency permit, but only on a six-month basis, which required renewal. The government approved the canon's visa but by year's end had not approved a visa for his successor.

During a forum on Islamic cultural thought in April, former Minister of Religious Affairs and Head of the High Islamic Council Bouabdellah Ghlamallah stated the Islamic faith is based on dialogue and works for "the consecration of coexistence and tolerance between religions and cultures."

On October 25, President Tebboune met with visiting Vatican Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Holy See's diplomatic relations with Algeria. During the visit, Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra also met with the Archbishop and stressed that the two parties wished to have more consultations. Lamamra indicated that citizens of Christian faith enjoy "all the rights of citizenship in Algeria."

Government-owned radio stations continued to broadcast Christmas and Easter services in French and Arabic. The country's state-run religious television and radio channels broadcast messages against religious extremism. After Friday prayers, state broadcasters aired religious programs countering extremism. Some examples included *Au Coeur de Islam* (At the Heart of Islam) on Radio Channel 3 and *Dans le Sens de l'Islam* (Understanding the Meaning of Islam) on national television.

Senior government officials continued to publicly condemn acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and urged all members of society to reject extremist behavior.

The government and public and private companies funded the preservation of some Catholic churches, particularly those of historical importance. The wilaya of Oran completed an extensive renovation of the Catholic chapel at Notre Dame de Santa Cruz and its large statue of the Virgin Mary as part of its cultural patrimony. Catholic Church leaders in Oran reported a good relationship with the authorities and ongoing interfaith dialogue with Muslim community. According to the MRA, the government also contributed to renovations of the Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers and the Saint-Augustin Basilica in Annaba. The MRA continued to organize an initiative, in partnership with the MOI and local neighborhoods, to clean up Christian cemeteries as part of an ongoing effort to maintain historical and cultural landmarks.

According to the government, authorities regularly invited accredited religious representatives to attend national holiday ceremonies.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Christian leaders said they had good relations with Muslims in their communities. Christian and Muslim leaders hosted each other during the year. The Notre Dame de Santa Cruz in Oran, site of a fort and Catholic chapel, and the Pierre Claverie Center, a Catholic church and community center in Oran, hosted frequent nonreligious community events and reported Muslims often participated alongside Christians. The EPA reported excellent interfaith dialogue within the religious community.

A Jewish community leader said the Jewish community was sometimes conflated with Israel in the public consciousness, which occasionally led to incidents of antisemitism from the broader population. During the year, *Algerie Patriotique*, a publication with a small distribution that media analysts characterized as having extreme views, published editorials containing antisemitic tropes, with frequent references to Israel as the “Zionist entity.”

Christian leaders said some Christian converts continued to keep a low profile due to concern for their personal safety and the potential for legal, familial, career, and social problems. According to religious leaders, some individuals who openly engaged in any religious practice other than Sunni Islam reported that family, neighbors, or others criticized their religious practice, pressured them to convert back to Islam, and occasionally insinuated they could be in danger because of their choice. Other converts practiced their new religion openly, according to members of the Christian community.

Media reports often discussed judicial proceedings against members of minority Muslim religious communities such as Ahmadi Muslims and Shia Muslims without the presumption of innocence, and local media occasionally portrayed these communities as “sects” or “deviations” from Islam. Ahmadi leaders said their faith was often misunderstood by the public, which largely believed the Ahmadi community was non-Muslim.

EPA leaders said that when Christian converts died, in rare instances family members buried them according to Islamic rites, and their churches had no standing to intervene on their behalf. Christian groups reported some villages, for example in the Kabylie Region, continued to prohibit Christians from being buried alongside Muslims. In these cases, Christians opted to be buried under Islamic rites so their remains could stay near those of their families.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

During the year, embassy officials met with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, Justice, and Interior to discuss the difficulties Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, and Christian, Jewish, and other minority religious groups faced in registering as associations, importing religious materials, and obtaining visas. Embassy officials regularly discussed church closures and jailed activists during these meetings.

From September 25 to 30, senior State Department officials, visited the country as part of a delegation of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Steering Committee. During its visit, the delegation met with officials from the Ministries of Interior and Religious Affairs as well as representatives of various faith communities and civil society organizations and advocated greater respect for religious freedom.

In meetings with senior government officials, the Ambassador routinely raised religious freedom concerns, specifically advocating the registration of minority religious communities, the reopening of shuttered religious institutions, and the release of individuals imprisoned on charges related to the practice of their faith.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met during the year with government-affiliated and independent religious leaders and representatives of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, including the Catholic and Anglican Churches, the EPA, the Ahmadi Muslim, Sufi Muslim, and Jewish communities, to discuss interreligious dialogue and tolerance and, in the case of religious minorities, their rights and legal status.

During travel throughout country, the Ambassador routinely visited religious institutions and spoke with minority religious communities about religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador used these engagements to highlight the tradition of religious diversity and respect for freedom of worship in the country.

Embassy officials discussed the practice of religion, its intersection with politics, religious tolerance, and the religious roles of women with religious and political leaders as well as with the Muslim Scholars Association and the High Islamic

Council. The embassy used special events, social media, and speakers' programs to emphasize a message of religious tolerance and respect. Specifically, the embassy used its cultural engagements to emphasize tolerance and its social media engagements to promote the benefits of diversity and inclusion through messages from the Ambassador marking religious holidays. Embassy officials held iftars during Ramadan with members of the country's different religious communities.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Algeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.